Chapter 8

The Pike and the Printing Press: Military Handbooks and the Gentrification of the Early Modern Military Revolution

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In 1579 the London printer Henry Bynneman released Thomas Digges’ *An Arithmeticall Militare Treatise, named Stratioticos*.¹ The book, based on the unpublished work of Digges’ father, Leonard, was dedicated to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. In his dedication, Digges told the Earl of his concern that England’s “warlike discipline” was “corrupted, ...fallen to ruine, and miserable servitude” and “extreme disorders grove in those armyes, where militare lawes, ordinances, have bene neglected,” much to the ultimate hurt of Elizabeth’s kingdom both at home and abroad.² This was a familiar thread of civic minded rhetoric, employed by Digges’ contemporaries who were unconcerned with hyperbole.³ However, Digges added weight to his argument by reciting to his readers, the statements of experienced soldiers he had spoken to, about this martial distemper. Clearly, the classical models of discipline and order, which had for so long built the foundation of English armies, were no longer held in such high esteem. Warfare was fundamentally different now, thanks in no small part to the new technologies deployed on continental battlefields. The soldiers told Digges,

that the time was chaunged, that warres were altered, and the furie or ordinaunce suche, as all those Romane orders were mere toyes once to be talked of in these our dayes: As though the heavens and elements had chaunged their natures, or men and weapons so altered, as no humaine reason might attaine to consider the difference.⁴

² Ibid., sig. Aii r–v. Quotes from this and other works have been silently altered in letter forms and capitalisation. Spelling and punctuation has been retained. Any other alterations are indicated in the notes.
⁴ Digges, *An Arithmeticall Militare Treatise*, sig [Aiii r].
Digges did not share their rejection of the classical authorities; rather he wrote that the real value of classical, Roman tactical or strategic exemplars was their focus on military discipline and the education of soldiers in the arts and sciences of warfare. It was this intellectual foundation to Roman practice that was relevant to his contemporary readers and the deliberate and organised study of arms and the skills of soldiering were, for Digges, the secret to Rome’s military success. Familiarity with military knowledge as an art or science, not parade-ground formalism, gave Rome its victories and the neglect of that knowledge, by generals and common soldiers, contributed to the Empire’s final downfall.

Digges’ remedy for the English decline of martial knowledge may appear unintuitive, considering that the bulk of the Stratioticos is a complex and not particularly accessible catalogue of mathematical and geometric formulas, proofs, and tables with abstract military applications, and not a drill manual or handbook of ideal practice for soldiers and officers. Digges did append a description of various military offices and a hypothetical model for an expeditionary force as a final piece of advice to his patron, a model that he hoped the Earl of Leicester would adopt for any campaigns he may command in the future, but this was secondary to the very technical purpose of the book. Late sixteenth-century military handbooks are not considered a particularly significant development in warfare or text-based education but they represent an important shift in English and European martial culture. Digges, and other gentleman authors, like him, represent a kind of gentrification of martial culture that was inherited, or appropriated, parts of noble or aristocratic society for themselves and the inclusion of the gentry in English and European warfare was enabled, in part, by the development of text-based education and an international community of gentry-authors who translated, adapted, and enlarged the genre of learned violence, to educate a new class of martial elites.

Henry J. Webb placed authors like Leonard Digges and his Elizabethan contemporaries like as Barnaby Riche, Thomas Churchyard, and Geoffrey Gates, squarely within a movement of military reform that was not driven by cultural change or exchange, but instead by technology. England’s military, Webb wrote,

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5 Stephen Johnston, ‘Digges, Thomas (c.1546–1595)’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009). Digges accompanied the 1585 expedition to the Low Countries as muster-master and trench-master where he struggled to implement some of his methods through the management of finances. His devotion to the Earl of Leicester resulted in two positive accounts of his leadership on campaign: A briefe report of the militarie services done in the Low Countries, by the Erle of Leicester (London, Arnold Hatfield for Gregory Seton, 1587) and A breife and true report of the proceedings of the Earle of Leycester for the reliefe of the towne of Sluce (London, Thomas Orwin, 1590).